THE FELLĀḤIN OF UPPER EGYPT

Numbers of these prophylactics may be seen hanging from the necks of the hapless infants.

The various primitive medicinal remedies, well known to, and used by, all village matrons, are of such a nature that one wonders how any child manages to survive at all. Most of the women have a deeply rooted objection to going to a doctor for advice, supposing one to be available in the neighbourhood ; and I have found it hard work to overcome this prejudice, even in the case of people who know me well and who have every confidence in me. It is encouraging to hear that the Egyptian Government has recently allocated a certain sum of money for the purpose of starting baby-welfare centres. If only these institutions can be got into good working order, and can be utilized for the purpose of training young girls in the proper care and management of children, it will be a big step in the right direction, will ensure a much stronger and healthier peasantry, and will put an end to a vast amount of unnecessary suffering. During the years I have lived among these people I have had hundreds of sick children of all ages brought to me, and it has been heartbreaking to realize, as having had no medical training I inevitably must, that I am quite incapable of dealing with the terrible diseases from which they are often suffering. As will be seen in some of the subsequent chapters, a great deal of this sickness is due to superstition—taboos against washing, for instance, being very strict.

Much good has, of course, been done by the dispensaries, which in the past were run by Englishwomen ; but they are naturally limited in number, and the mothers will often defer taking their children there for advice and medicine till it is almost too late, or, at any rate, till the child has become very ill indeed. I myself had the privilege of seeing something of what was accomplished by an English lady at one of these dispensaries during the first three or four years that I resided in Egypt. I can bear witness to the splendid work she did, and I know how much she was loved and respected by the hundreds of poor women who brought their children to her for treatment. I am sure, from what I have heard of similar institutions in other parts of the country, that the same good work has been done by many others in the different provinces. The number of these dispensaries is not great enough to meet the crying need, and those that do exist have to be supported by funds from the Government, for they receive practically no support, so

PERSONAL DECORATION AND ORNAMENTS

being treated in this manner, and it seemed to be a somewhat painful process. However, "*Il faut souffrir pour être belle*," and these women do endure considerable discomfort in the course of their toilet.

The toffee-like substance described above is also used by women in a similar way in order to pull out any hairs that may be growing on their legs.

Most women and girls paint round the eyes with antimony (Arabic, *koḥl*). It is kept in a small bottle, generally of glass, called *mikḥaleh*, and is applied with a short stick with a blunt point. It is regarded not only as a beautifier, but also as a cure for sore eyes.

Scent is used by both sexes, some of it being of a very pungent nature. In some parts of Egypt it is taboo for a man to use scent while his wife is suckling her child. If he disobeys this rule the child, it is said, will come out all over in spots. A man whom I knew well used some scent on one occasion while his wife was still suckling their youngest-born. The child got nasty spots all over its body, and the mother told me that it was her husband's fault, because he had been putting some scent on his moustache!

I have sometimes heard English people remark on the dirty habit that the Egyptian peasant women have of wearing long dresses which trail over the ground, brushing up the dust in clouds as they go along. It is, of course, a very insanitary practice, but the wearing of short skirts would be looked upon as most immodest. A woman's legs should never be exposed, except from dire necessity. There is also another reason for the trailing skirts. Most peasant women walk barefooted, and so leave clearly defined footprints in the dry, dusty soil. A woman can be injured magically through her foot-prints, and so the long skirt acts as a safeguard, brushing over and thus obliterating them.

Little girls wear very bright-coloured cotton frocks, which reach almost to the ground (see Fig. 17). The women and older girls may wear such frocks indoors, but when they walk abroad, either to shop, to fill their water-jars, or to visit their friends, they wear a long black dress over the coloured one, and a thick veil, shawl-shaped, over their heads.

I was told by a friend some few years ago that in Sharḳiyeh Province the women wear long white veils, on which are several gold or silver ornaments. These ornaments are in the form of

2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Upper Egypt
COPTS MR10

DEATH AND FUNERARY CEREMONIES

F 769 775

That the souls of the dead come to the cemeteries is again shown in the following belief. I have been told by two or three of my village friends that when the people go to visit the cemetery, and they see a number of small green birds near the graves, they believe that these birds are the souls of the dead who lie buried there. Lane[1] says that "Souls of martyrs (*shuhadā*) reside in the crops of green birds, which eat of the fruits of Paradise and drink of its rivers." This is the belief as he heard it. It was definitely stated to me that the green birds *are* the souls of the dead.

F [825]

F 764 765 784

There are certain taboos on mourners, two of which are the following. If a person, male or female, has attended a funeral and walked in the procession, or even only gone part of the way, he or she must not enter the house where a woman has a baby under seven days old, for this will cause the mother to have no milk. Such a person must inform the mother of the child that he desires to enter her house, and she must then go outside to meet the visitor, who can then come into it without any evil consequences.

F 765 753 784

Again, no such mourner must enter a house in which there is some one suffering from sore eyes, for in that case the sufferer will lose his or her sight. Such intending visitors must wait outside the house, and the man or woman who has sore eyes must come out and meet them there first, and then they can enter without danger.

F & 764

The death and funeral rites of the Copts are in many respects very similar to those of the Muslims.

The following incidents were witnessed by me several years ago when I was staying in a small village in Fayûm Province, and this account of what I actually saw will best describe the ceremonies incident to the death and burial of a Copt. It must always be remembered that these are accounts of death and funeral rites as practised by the peasants only, and that they are not meant to be a description of the ceremonies which take place among educated people on similar occasions.

Early one morning a visitor brought to the house where I was staying the news of the death of a poor but much respected Copt who lived in an adjacent village. It was suggested that his relations and friends would much appreciate a visit from me, so I started off on my donkey as soon as possible after the sad tidings had reached me. It was not long before I arrived at the house of

F & [492]

[1] *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (London, 1871), vol. i, p. 83.

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boy fell to the ground, where a stone struck one of his eyes and destroyed the sight. The boy then knew that the donkey was really an *ʿafrīt* which had assumed animal form, and presently he heard it saying, " Don't come here again. If you do I will injure you ! "

Up to the present time the boy, who is now a grown man, has never dared to return to this church for fear of the *ʿafrīt*. He told my informant this story himself, and swears to the truth of it.

The *ʿafārīt*, as I have already explained, sometimes leave their subterranean home and come above ground. It is therefore considered dangerous to stamp on the ground, to strike it with a stick, or to throw anything violently on it. Such acts should be especially avoided at night, when the *ʿafārīt* are believed to come up in large numbers. If a man, therefore, has to walk some distance at night he is glad if he can get a fisherman to accompany him, for he believes that then no *ʿafrīt* will come near him. The *ʿafārīt* are afraid of fishermen and of their nets, and when they see these men throwing their nets they run away in terror. One woman told me that the *ʿafārīt* fear that they may get caught in the nets.

A few days after I had left a certain village in Upper Egypt a boy who was employed by the *ʿomdeh* (headman of the village) was in the building containing the machinery installed by the *ʿomdeh* for pumping up water for irrigating his fields. It was at night, and for some reason or other the boy happened to stamp on the ground with his feet. Soon after he lay down to sleep, but was aroused by an *ʿafrīt* who tried to pluck out his eyes. The boy cried out, " Oh, leave me, and forgive me ! " But the *ʿafrīt* refused, saying that when he had stamped on the ground he had injured the head of one of his children. The boy cried out, and then, being a Copt, crossed himself, whereupon the *ʿafrīt* disappeared.

That *ʿafārīt* are capable of kindly actions is shown in the following belief. A boy who is still uncircumcised may be mysteriously carried away when sleeping beside his mother at night. He will be brought back to his sleeping-place on the same night, and on the following morning his mother will find that he has been circumcised, the operation having been much better done than if it had been performed by the village barber; moreover, the wound will be found to have already healed. In such a case it is believed that the boy has a good *ḳarīn* who has brought good *ʿafārīt* to perform this painful operation painlessly.

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years of age, who used to be a village guard. He told a friend of mine that he knew that the ground on which the *ʿomdeh's* engine now stands used to be the haunt of *ʿafārīt*, for, when doing patrols at night round the outskirts of the village, he had sometimes seen on that spot a plough pulled by oxen and driven by a man, or sometimes a threshing-machine with the oxen and their driver, all made of fire. As this guard approached them he would cross himself, whereupon the *ʿafārīt* who had assumed these forms would disappear.

If a woman fears that *ʿafārīt* are in her house she puts a *ḳulleh* of water on the floor of one of the rooms, and near it she places some bread and salt, leaving them in this position during the night. This protects the whole house, and effectually prevents any *ʿafārīt* from entering it.

Nightmare and sleepwalking are supposed to be caused by *ʿafārīt*, and if a child suffers from either of these complaints it is a sign that an *ʿafrīt* has entered its body. This may have happened because the child has done something wrong; perhaps, so it was suggested to me, it had plucked some of the ears of corn from a field belonging to a neighbour. If a Coptic child sleepwalks or has nightmare its parents call in a priest, who tells them to bring seven *ḳanādīl* (old-fashioned saucer-lamps, with floating wicks). The priest then asks for a jar of water, and prays seven special prayers, burning incense meanwhile in a censer. As he finishes one prayer he puts out one lamp, after a second prayer a second lamp, and so on, till all the prayers are said and all the lamps extinguished. He now tells the parents to place the jar of water on the roof of the house, where it must remain for one night. On the following morning the child is bathed in the water, after which, it is believed, he will be cured.

Among the Muslims if a child is affected in this way the parents go to a magician, who writes a charm of protection for the child to wear.

In addition to his soul (*rōḥ*) every human being is believed to possess an *ʿafrīt* which leaves his body at death. In certain circumstances it may be a menace to any person who comes near it. Animals also have an *ʿafrīt*. This belief especially attracted my attention recently. A little dog which had been badly injured took refuge in the bathroom of my house. My servant told me that he was sure it could not live, and that, before it died, he must

some other of the saints. All this is the result of ignorance arising from girls not being educated.

[Description of the *Zār*.]

"First of all the *Kūdīya* arose and placed a chair in the middle of the room and made our hostess, the mistress of the house, sit on it. She next produced [p. 75] two hens and a cock. She tied the legs of the hens together, placed the cock on her head and the two hens on her shoulders, and began reciting the appointed rigmarole and declaiming verses, whilst the birds for fear of her were screaming and shrieking until the place shook, and all the ladies were stroking their faces and saying: 'Please, oh, Lords! Help, oh, people of Allah! Pity, oh, my Lords!' whilst she was reciting and holding in her hand the drum which is called the *bandīr* in the parlance of the *Ṣūfīs* [lit. the people of the way]. Then she began pounding upon it and uttering incantations after that fashion, until when she ceased she took down the cock and the hens, and went out to the courtyard of the house, and brought in a ram, one of the best, and ordered it to be slaughtered. When it was stabbed she brought forth a dish and caught the blood in it, and ordered the lady to drink some of that blood, and anoint her limbs with it, which she did. We were all looking at what might make one's flesh creep. For we know that blood is forbidden, as much as the dead, or the flesh of the pig. When they were finished with these shocking actions, they surrounded her, having drums, and cymbals (*ṣunūg*) in their hands, and brought her in with, I fancy, greater ceremony than she had at her wedding, smeared as she was with blood in place of the wedding ornaments, until she sat in front of the *Kūdīya* and her followers. All sat in their places, and the ladies who were invited also sat down. The assembly composed itself and coffee was brought in, and they rested for half an hour. Then they took up their drums and began beating furiously with bewildering incantation. Meanwhile the lady was kneeling in front of the drummers with her head upside down [p. 76] on the ground till one of them came with a bundle of clothes consisting of a change of men's clothing, namely, an *'abā'a* [or cloak] embroidered with gold and silver thread in the best style. They opened it and brought out a robe of

4: Walker E-4 (no date) 1934 (ca. 1890) MR13 Fellahin MR13

FOLK MEDICINE IN MODERN EGYPT

XI

THE "CURE" FOR ITCH AND DRY SCAB

AMONG the severest of the diseases that afflict mankind is skin-disease (or eczema) with its different varieties, either moist or dry. The "cure" for the dry variety among the "old wives" is to clothe the afflicted one in a garment of pure silk.

A very trustworthy person has related that he had not omitted to use everything prescribed by modern medicine, but without success. So he employed the silk garment and his ailment passed completely away. Indeed the prescription of the "old wife" agrees with what is set down in Canon Law regarding prohibiting men from wearing pure silk except in the case of itch.[1]

XII

THE "CURE" FOR PROTUBERANT TUMOURS

THE "old wives" do not stick at any of the diseases unless it is outside the sphere of trickery to affect its "cure." They do not trouble whether by the process of imagination, either through the power of the Jinn, or the development of thought, a "cure" will result. So beware of a very valuable "cure" for tumours which appear on the skin.

The patient seeks out a hen, free from blemish, without a single white feather, and watches her until she lays an egg in a place unreached [p. 25] by the rays of the sun. Then he brings lentils to her with their seeds to all appearance the same in number as the tumours on his body. After he has emptied

[1] [For the references to the prohibition of silken garments, see A. J. Wensinck: *A Handbook of Early Muhammadan Tradition*, Leiden, 1927, p. 45 f. Tr.]